

children, had important roles to play in maintaining the well-being of the family. For example, the oldest male member of the family served as the spiritual head and the ultimate authority figure. His role was to maintain law and order in the family, pour libations at the shrine of the ancestors, and represent the family's interests in the larger village community.

Children were expected to help care for their younger siblings and run errands for older members of the family. It was also their duty to obtain firewood for cooking and to fetch water from local streams. Men and women had complementary tasks. "Men did hard labor, such as clearing the land for farming, cultivating, planting, and harvesting crops. They did home constructions and repairs,"<sup>22</sup> writes Yakubu. The women helped men in farming, weeding, harvesting, and processing farm products. They were also responsible for supervising and disciplining the children, making sure they grew up to be useful citizens. Women performed most of the household work as well, including housekeeping and preparation of meals. An Ibo man, reminiscing over life in the communal-based traditional Ibo society, said,

we were all habituated to labor from our earliest years. Everyone contributed something to the common stock, and as we were unacquainted with idleness, we had no beggars. Practically no one, except the very young and very old, were exempt from manual work. Productivity and hard work were highly esteemed.<sup>23</sup>

## Native Food

The Ibos' native diet consisted primarily of pounded yam, cassava, or cocoyam (*fufu*) served with seasoned vegetable soup made

with sun-dried or smoked fish or meat. Food-stuff, such as maize, beans, peanuts, plantains, pumpkins, breadfruit, and okra, was also eaten for variety. Wild and domestic fruits, such as oranges, mangoes, guava, and papaw, were abundant, but they were eaten primarily as snacks and did not form part of the staple diet. Although they raised livestock (chicken, goats, and sheep), the traditional Ibo preferred dried fish over meat. And "bush meat" (hunted meat) was considered more tasty than meat from domestic animals.

In most families, meals were prepared together and everybody ate at the same time. In others, however, each wife was responsible for preparing meals for herself and her children. The wives then took turns preparing the husband's meal. Before eating, the father would offer a portion of his meal and drink to the cult of the ancestors. He thanked them for the meal and for life, and asked for protection from enemies and evil forces. This gesture of honoring the spirit of the dead by regularly offering them libations and asking for protection reflects the Ibo people's profound belief in the power of supernatural forces to affect and determine their life experiences.

## Religion

"The Ibos were nothing if not profoundly religious," says Elizabeth Isichei, a scholar of Ibo culture and society. "All accounts of their life reflect that fact."<sup>24</sup> A German missionary to Iboland in 1841 commented how the Ibos believed that everything in their society was governed by gods and ancestors:

To the Ibo the secular and the sacred, the natural and the supernatural, are a continuum. Supernatural forces continually impinge on life and must be propitiated by appropriate prayers and sacrifices.<sup>25</sup>

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Traditional Ibo attitudes toward the supernatural are understandable, says T. Nwala, if one recognizes that the Ibos lived constantly with the harsh realities of their natural environment. They accepted the limitations of human efforts and acknowledged that there were forces higher than humans that helped determine their fate. "Igbo religious life," he states, "is an integral element of their total cultural life which aims at self-realization of some sort that consists in nothing other than living in harmony with the cosmic order."<sup>26</sup>

### Belief in Many Gods

The Ibos, like people in most African societies, were polytheists. They believed in and worshiped many gods. Their belief system consisted of three hierarchical layers of the supernatural world. At the head of the hierarchy was the ultimate supernatural being, known as Chukwu (the Great God), or Chineke (God, the Creator). Underneath Chukwu were the lesser but powerful gods, Umuagbara. Below the gods were the spirits of dead ancestors, Ndi Ichie, and the personal gods, Chi.

To the Ibos, the reason for having this hierarchy of the supernatural was quite simple. The people believed that Chukwu was so powerful and so fearful that ordinary human beings could not possibly approach him directly with impunity. To approach Chukwu, one needed the help of the lesser but powerful gods and one's departed ancestors to act as intermediaries.

### Umuagbara

The lesser gods consisted of male and female deities with certain specified areas of natural control that often overlapped, including the

## The Ibo Worldview

*The Ibos believed that the universe was made up of two worlds: the world of humans and the world of spirits. The two worlds are related and interdependent. As Victor Uchendu explains in his book The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria, the two worlds function on the principle of "beneficial reciprocity."*

"The Igbo world is a 'real' one in every respect. There is the world of man peopled by all created beings and things, both animate and inanimate. The spirit world is the abode of the creator, the deities, the disembodied and malignant spirits, and the ancestral spirits. It is the future abode of the living after their death. There is constant interaction between the world of man and the dead; the visible and invisible forces. Existence for the Igbo, therefore, is a dual but interrelated phenomenon involving the interaction between the material and the spiritual, the visible and the invisible, the good and the bad, the living and the dead."

gods of thunder, the river, the harvest, and so on. These gods were collectively called Agbala, Agbara, Ajala, or Arusi (the oracle). All the gods were respected, but they were not given equal importance and power. Generally, every village recognized one deity as the most powerful depending on the needs and experiences of the community. This deity became the most influential god to the people and occupied a central position in their lives and activities. The deity was believed to control harvest yields, fertility, and life—areas paramount to the survival of a community. Ala or Ani (the earth goddess), was the sacred deity



Ornate sculptures call attention to an Ibo shrine along the road from Nsukka to Enugu, Nigeria. Traditional Ibos practice a polytheistic religion and devote shrines to the various deities they worship.

in some villages. In others, it was Amadioha (the god of thunder) or perhaps the river god, if the village was near the coast.

Libations and prayers were offered daily to the gods. And each village set apart certain periods of the year to feast and make merriment in honor of their gods. "During the feasts, sacrifices and offerings were made as thanksgiving, petitions for protection, absolution for sins, and requests for life, health, chil-

dren, wealth and security,"<sup>27</sup> notes Nwala. Among the great village festivals or feasts in Iboland were the New Yam Festival (Ifejioku or Iwaji) and the New Year Festival (Igu Aro).

### Ndi Ichie and Chi

Beneath the nature gods were the spirits of dead ancestors (Ndi Ichie) and the guardian

or personal gods of their ancestors. The ancestors helped prevent them from harm in times of trouble.

The Chi, or personal guardian, was responsible for one's success. It was considered especially important for children, and (Ikenga) as outward symbols. Two Chi were believed to exist in one person, but one cannot be seen. Views are expressed through such as "Ebe onye ya" (Where a person's Chi brings her Chi brings onye adighi nwa) (less a person's Chi is him or her).

It was very individual to have a Chi. This meant a person's Chi. A person's Chi was spoken of as a bad Chi). And

The Ibo was concerned with Uzodinma (Philosophy of god associated with the Ibo)

"The nature of the abstract is the nature of its environment. It is the nature of the deities and the nature of the universe."

or personal gods (Chi). The Ibos worshiped their ancestors. They believed that dead ancestors helped protect living relations, prevent them from harm, and intercede for them in times of trouble.

The Chi, or personal god, was believed to be responsible for individual safety and success. It was common for individuals, especially children, to wear talismans or charms (*Ikenga*) as outward symbols of their Chi. No two Chi were alike, and the Ibos believed that one cannot be greater than one's Chi. The views are expressed in numerous proverbs, such as "*Ebe onye dara obu chi ya kwaturu ya*" (Where a person falls, that is where his or her Chi brings him or her down) and "*Chi onye adighi nizu, onwu adighi egbu ya*" (Unless a person's Chi agrees, death does not kill him or her).

It was very unfortunate indeed for an individual to have a lazy or an uncoordinated Chi. This meant consistent failure and poverty. A person who had a history of misfortune was spoken of as *onye chi ojo* (a person with a bad Chi). And when an individual seemed to

exist in a perpetual state of misery and misfortune, he or she was advised to die and go ask for a better Chi (*Nwua ga jugharia*).

## Reincarnation

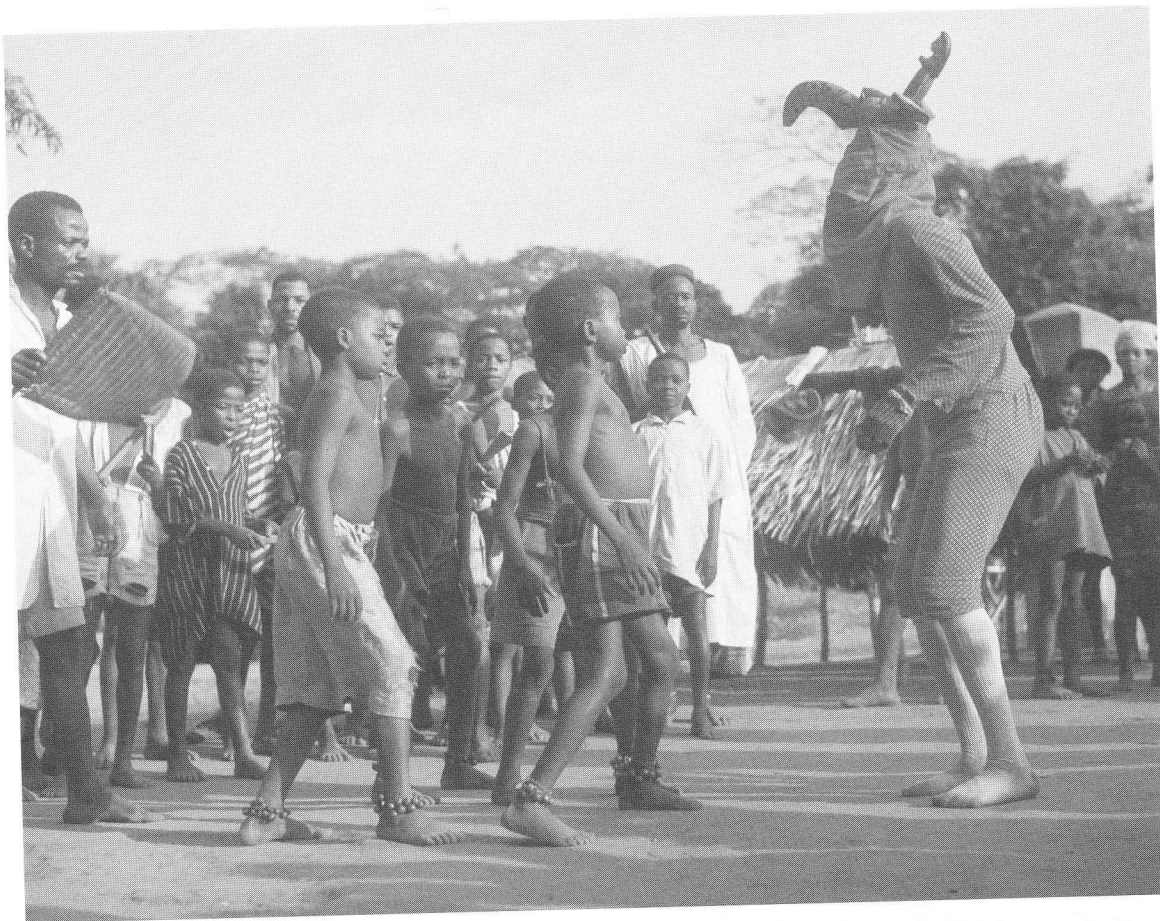
"Telling a person to die was not a sign of meanness by the Ibos," explains Nwala. "It merely indicated a belief in reincarnation and the notion that death was not final."<sup>28</sup> The Ibos saw death as a transient phase into another life. When a person died, the individual was believed to continue his or her life in the spirit world. As Victor Uchendu, an Ibo ethnographer, explains, "The world of the dead is a world full of activities; its inhabitants manifest in their behavior and thought processes that they are 'living.'"<sup>29</sup> Life in the world of the dead, however, was viewed as temporary. The dead were eventually reincarnated after they had been given the opportunity to determine their future fate in the world of humans. It was, therefore, of paramount importance that a balance be maintained

## The Ibo Deities or Nature Gods

*The Ibos believed that the natural world was controlled by supernatural forces. T. Uzodinma Nwala indicates in his book Igbo Philosophy that every aspect of nature had a god associated with it.*

"The nature of the local deities, oracles, and abstract forces and ancestral spirits reflect the nature of the traditional Igbo society and its environment as well as the ideals cherished by the various communities. The deities are associated with the natural environment such as rivers, trees, climate, topog-

raphy and the natural elements. River deities are found in the riverine areas, and they answer the names of the local rivers associated with them. Thus we have Idemili, Imoh, Otankpa, Ulasi, etc. The frequent electrical storms which endanger life yields belief in the god of Thunder—Amadioha or Kama. Being an agricultural people with much concern for the fertility of the soil, there is general belief in the Earth deity Ala, and Ahajioku or Ifejioku. Thus, Igbo traditional physical environment very much determined the nature of the local deities."



*An Ibo priest performs a ritual dance with a group of children in Onitsha, Nigeria. In addition to conducting ceremonies and rituals, priests help to maintain a balance between the Ibo world and the spirit realm.*

between the two cosmic orders (the world of humans and the world of spirits) for the well-being of everyone.

### **Priests and Priestesses**

Maintaining the balance between the worlds of humans and spirits was the duty of everyone, with the help of the village priests and priestesses. The chief priest or priestess was in charge of the ceremonies and rituals pertaining to the gods. Priesthood was consid-

ered a special gift from the gods and was usually hereditary. A son or daughter could inherit the gift from a parent. To traditional Ibos, a priest and a priestess were equal, and the words of the gods that the priest or priestess presented were unquestionable and binding.

### **Diviners**

In addition to the priests and priestesses of the gods, there were also male and female di-

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